

now i got the answer by QueenWithABeeThrone

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Summary:

There's a world out there where Nancy Wheeler's a good daughter, a good student, where she's the perfect image of an American beauty, coming into her own, where her family's picture-perfect and Karen and her dead baby son aren't hanging over them, like the Sword of Damocles.

But that's not the world she lives in, is it.

or: Nancy Wheeler's just trying to get through another year at Hawkins High. then her best friend disappears after a fight, and if Nancy's the only one who cares then damn it, she's going to find her friend. somehow.

now i got the answer

Author's Note:

title is from the Runaways' "Queens of Noise".

background notes: Karen Wheeler was institutionalized after her failed attempts at suing Brenner and MK-ULTRA over the loss of baby Mike. afterwards, Ted Wheeler remarried and he and his new wife tried to bury any hint of abnormal things having ever happened. bc patriotism or whatever.

you can imagine how Nancy felt about all of that.
hint: Not Great.

There's a world out there, Nancy sometimes thinks, where Karen Wheeler is well. Where she's not the ghost Nancy's father is determinedly trying to bury, where Nancy can talk to her and not get the same string of words over and over again.

There's a world out there where Nancy Wheeler's a good daughter, a good student, where she's the perfect image of an American beauty, coming into her own, where her family's picture-perfect and Karen and her dead baby son aren't hanging over them, like the Sword of Damocles.

But that's not the world she lives in, is it.

Nancy hauls Steve Harrington in for a bruising kiss, rough and hard, her back against the wall. The bell rings, on and on and on.

She lets it ring.

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The teachers say, "Ms. Wheeler, you're smarter than this."

Nancy's father says, "What is *wrong* with you? I didn't raise you like this!"

Steve says, “Hey, fuck them anyway. Come hang with me,” and she smiles and takes his hand.

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“Can I copy your homework?”

“Sure,” says Barb, turning over a page for Nancy to peruse, “what are friends for, anyway?”

“Thanks,” says Nancy. Her eyes catch on a sentence about the character of Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, and she huffs out a breath and says, “You could use some work here.”

“Where?” says Barb, scrambling closer. They’re sitting on Barb’s bed on a Saturday night, because Nancy wants to spend as little time as possible in her own home, haunted by ghosts of the living and the dead.

“When you talk about Heathcliff and Catherine,” says Nancy, “the way you do it and segue into discussing Heathcliff is a little too abrupt. Maybe if you added something more about how Catherine’s rejection screwed him up even more.”

“Huh,” says Barb. “Yeah, you’re right.” She takes the notebook back from Nancy. “You know, you could ace these classes without my help. You’re smart enough.”

Nancy falls back onto the bed, stares up at the ceiling. She could, is the thing. She gets Chaucer, she gets Chemistry, she understands how $2x + 6$ translates into the Cartesian plane. If she put in the effort she could pull her grades up to above C-level.

If she put in the effort. If she had a chance of getting out of Hawkins, any time soon. If she ever thought she had a shot at being anything other than a disappointment to her father, a non-entity to her mother, second-best to her dead little brother.

“I like hanging out with you,” she says, carelessly.

“You could hang out with me without having to copy my homework,” says Barb. “Honestly? Half the time, Nance, you’re the

one correcting it.”

“So we’re both helping each other out,” says Nancy. “Hey, by the way —party at Steve’s, this Friday night. You coming?”

Barb’s breath hisses out between her teeth, as she flops down beside Nancy. They make a strange pair, she thinks, Barb in her frumpy shirts and glasses and Nancy in her leather jackets and dark makeup, but then Barb is the closest thing she has to a real friend.

“I don’t know, Nancy,” she starts.

“It’ll be fun,” Nancy wheedles.

“For you,” says Barb.

“And for you,” says Nancy. “One party won’t hurt, and you won’t even have to go to school the next day.”

“I’ll think about it,” says Barb.

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Jonathan Byers is a non-entity, for Nancy.

Sure, she’s seen him around a couple times, taking pictures of people like a creep. Sure, he’s even kind of attractive, in that soulful weirdo way that probably draws some girls in.

But he’s never really crossed her radar, before. They run in completely different circles, the two of them, the photographer and the cool girl, and for the most part Nancy’s content to let it be.

Then his brother disappears, and—

Nancy’s not heartless. No matter how much she tries to not care, she can’t help but look at Jonathan and feel bad for him. His brother’s missing, after all, and she’s kind of an expert in missing brothers.

Or, well. Hers is dead, so. She isn’t that much of an expert.

She walks up to him anyway and says, “How’re you holding up?”

Jonathan freezes like a deer caught in the headlights of a speeding car. He looks down at her, blinking rapidly, then breathes tiredly out. "I'm—fine," he says, warily.

"Sure, you are," says Nancy, glancing between him and the poster. He stiffens, lips thinning, eyes narrowing.

Then she sighs, and runs a hand through her hair. "We're all thinking about you," she says. "He'll come back." The question, though, is if Will's coming back to them alive or in a body bag. If he comes back at all.

Jonathan looks back at the poster. "Thanks," he says, quietly.

"Nance!" Steve shouts, from down the hall. "We gotta go!"

Nancy sighs, then looks at Jonathan once more. She wishes she could say more, do more.

She says, "I'm sorry."

"What do you have to be sorry for?" Jonathan asks, and he sounds so much more tired than he should be.

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She does not see him leave.

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She does not see Barb leave, either.

In retrospect, she should've stayed with her. Maybe then Barb would've had a chance. Maybe—

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There's a world out there where Nancy Wheeler is a perfect student, an all-American beauty, the good girl bound for college somewhere outside of Hawkins, and yet none of that stops her from losing her closest, dearest friend.

She's none of those things. She doesn't think she knows how to be any of those things, or if she ever did, she's buried them so far underneath that she's forgotten how to be anything other than cold and uncaring.

Her brother's ghost hangs over her. Her mother's ghost does, too—does it matter that Karen Wheeler's still alive?

And now she wonders if Barb will haunt her, too. Already she's replaying her last words to her in her mind, *fine, then, sit out by the pool and see if I care*, and she swallows the lump in her throat as she lies to Barb's mother over the phone and tells her, "Oh, she's probably in the library. You know how she is."

"All right," says Mrs. Holland, warmly. "Oh, and, Nancy?"

"Yeah?"

"Tell her I made her favorite, all right?" says Mrs. Holland. "You know how she gets when she's studying."

Nancy shuts her eyes. "I will," she lies, and hangs up.

Just to make sure, she drops by the library and asks if Barb came by. Marissa, who's on duty today, shakes her head and watches her like a hawk as she roams around anyway, looking for any traces of Barb.

Nothing.

Once she's sure that Barb never made it to her home or the school, she heads out to the parking lot. Maybe she's still at Steve's house. Maybe she got drunk and passed out in the bushes, or in the woods, and Nancy will find her there, and they'll have a laugh about it and Nancy can apologize, for the things she said the night before, and they'll be fine.

She's fine. She's *fine*.

So why does Nancy's gut keep twisting into knots?

She steps into the parking lot. Steve's promised to drop her off at her house, but if she's being honest she's not really looking forward to

the prospect of talking to her father about last night's activities even more, or to her stepmom trying to act like she gives even half a shit about Nancy's life. Maybe they can drop by Steve's house so she can go look for Barb there—

What the hell?

“What's going on here?” she says, looking between Jonathan Byers and Steve and his friends. And—Nicole? The hell's Nicole doing here?

Carol looks up at Nancy, her lips curling up into a smirk. There are pictures in her hands in black and white. “If it isn't the starring lady herself,” she says.

“He was spying on us last night,” says Steve, casual and cool, but angry underneath.

“Lookin' good, Nance,” says Tommy, lazily. “Here, you gotta check this one out. Betcha he was saving this one all for himself.” He passes the picture to Nicole, who gives it to Nancy.

Nancy looks down.

Looks up at Jonathan.

“What the *fuck*?” she says.

“I was looking for my *brother*,” snaps Jonathan.

“He wasn't hiding in Steve's bedroom!” she snarls, stepping forward. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

Steve steps in between them, grabbing Nancy's shoulder to keep her from barreling forward and punching Jonathan in the face. “Nance, Nancy, Nancy,” he says, “it's fine. It's fine. Listen, he's a creep and a pervert—”

“I'm telling you, I didn't come for your stupid party,” says Jonathan.

“—and if you want him to stop,” Steve continues, like Jonathan never spoke, “you take his toy away.”

Nancy blinks at him. Then at Jonathan, his hands now twitching as if he very badly wants to start a fight, and the camera that Tommy's taken out of its bag. Then she says, "I think we've already made our point. Tommy. Put that *down*."

"Maybe," says Tommy, with a shrug, "but can't hurt to drive it in deeper."

"Are you serious right now?" Jonathan demands. "Fine, I *get it*, you don't want me near your parties. I won't go near them. Is that what you wanted?"

"Just put the camera down," says Nancy. "And you'd better not, Byers."

"You heard the lady," says Steve, nodding to Tommy. "Put the camera down."

Tommy, in answer, grins. He lets the camera drop to the ground, the fragile thing shattering into pieces upon impact. Carol laughs and throws the pictures at Jonathan's feet, afterwards, and the two of them take off without a care in the world as Jonathan gets on his knees, gathering up the pictures.

Steve lets go of Nancy. "Come on, Nance, let's go," he says. "We're gonna miss the game."

"You go on ahead," says Nancy, her voice hard.

Steve flinches back, surprised. "Nance—" he starts.

"Just go," says Nancy.

Steve goes, running after Tommy and Carol. Nancy sighs, and drops to her knees, gathering up the scattered pictures, the torn pieces of one picture with—with Barb.

"Why are you still here?" Jonathan asks, as she collects the torn-up pieces. "Shouldn't you be going off with Harrington right now?"

"Shouldn't you be looking for your brother instead of taking pictures of me?" Nancy snaps back. "What they did wasn't fair. What *you* did

wasn't fair either. Maybe I just want to yell at you before yelling at Steve and Tommy and Carol."

"I was looking for my brother," says Jonathan, with a huff. "He's good at getting into places he shouldn't be." He sighs, and says, "But the picture of you—you're right, I shouldn't have taken it. I just—"

"You're right," says Nancy, gathering up the pieces of Barb's picture and putting them into her pocket. "You shouldn't have." She stands up, and says, "I just wanted to ask you something. If you were at the party."

Jonathan nods. "Shoot," he says.

"Did you see Barb leave?" she asks.

Jonathan shakes his head. "Not exactly," he says. "It was just—one moment she was there, I looked away, and next she was gone. Why?"

"I have to go," says Nancy. Screw the game, screw Steve and his friends, screw Jonathan Byers and his camera. She's got to find Barb, and now she knows where to start.

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She finds Barb's car parked just outside the woods, exactly where they left it the night before.

She doesn't find Barb—not in Steve's backyard, not in the woods outside. She's about to leave and go home when she hears something rustling in the bushes.

"Barb?" she calls, stepping into the bushes. Must be a squirrel, she decides after a few moments. They're common enough around Hawkins, especially in the woods, and she turns away—

Something *moves*. She whips around, catches no more than a glimpse of some—some *thing*, bigger than her, moving faster than her eyes can track, and fear swoops low in her stomach. She has to get out of here, and she runs fast for the pool.

She trips. Swears, gets back up, and keeps running.

She doesn't look back.

--

The thing about disappearances is that sooner or later, somebody's bound to notice. Sure enough, Barb's sudden disappearance gets attention, especially after Will Byers' body is found, and Nancy comes to school one day to find Steve pacing, restless, near her locker.

"What's up?" she says.

"They're investigating Barb's disappearance now," he says, and Nancy shuts her locker door, rests her forehead against the cool metal. Maybe the cops can succeed where she couldn't.

And maybe, some tiny cynical little part of her reminds her, pigs are going to sprout wings and fly.

"That's good," she says.

"Not good," says Steve, agitated. "My parents are going to kill me—"

Nancy slams a hand against her locker door, loud enough that Steve jumps, surprised. "That's what you're worried about?" she asks, rage bubbling up in her chest. How dare he be worried about this, when her friend is missing, *how dare he*. "You selfish dick—"

"Nancy," Steve starts.

"Don't!" Nancy snaps, her voice like a whip. "Barb is missing! I know you don't care about her but, god, at least *pretend* you do!"

"You weren't exactly hanging out with her that night either," Steve snaps back. "You told her to *back the fuck off*, weren't those your exact words?"

"But I'm looking for her," Nancy snarls, "I went to your *house* and found shit all," and even as the words escape her mouth she knows they're a weak excuse. If she'd stayed with Barb, if she'd taken her friend's misgivings into account, if they'd left—maybe Barb would still be here.

Maybe the only person who's worked her way underneath Nancy's hardened shell would still be around.

"Was that you were doing?" says Steve. "During the game? Looking with Byers?"

"*Fuck* you, Harrington," Nancy says, fingers curling into fists. "Byers wasn't even there."

Steve blinks, surprised, and says, "He wasn't? Nancy—"

He reaches for her shoulder, apologetic. She smacks his hand off her leather sleeve, and turns away. She won't look back. She *won't*.

"Nancy!"

--

She talks to the police, and learns absolutely nothing from them beyond the fact that they're investigating, but they're not prioritizing Barb. At least not the way they prioritized poor dead Will Byers, and doesn't that just stick in her throat.

At least Jonathan knows what happened to his brother now. All Nancy's got is an itch thrumming under her skin, the feeling that the world's somehow off-kilter now without Barb, without knowing what happened to her, really.

She marches back home, and Hayley, blonde and perfect Hayley, is there to meet her.

"Oh, Nancy," she says, flatly, opening the door clad in a bathrobe. Her eyes flick over Nancy's wardrobe, her dark jacket and her comfortable boots and her stormy expression, and her lips thin. "Where have you been?" she says, clucking her tongue at her. "Your father's been so worried."

"I'll just bet he is, that's why he isn't here," says Nancy.

"He does have to work too, you know," says Hayley. "Electricity isn't cheap, after all."

"Neither's your perm," Nancy snaps back. "And I was at school. Like I always am."

"Oh, sweetie," Hayley starts, stepping forward to cup Nancy's face. Like Nancy's a little girl that needs reminding of her place.

Nancy steps back. "I'm going to my room," she says. "Do me a favor and stop pretending you care about me."

Hayley doesn't follow her up, but Nancy hears the sound of her slippers moving away, back to her romance novels and her bubble bath.

Good.

--

There aren't any pictures of her mother in the house. Her father had buried every one he could find, and her stepmother had tried her hardest to scrub out every trace that Nancy's mother had ever lived in this house. She couldn't do anything about Nancy, though.

Sometimes Nancy wonders what really motivated her father to marry Hayley. On her worst days, she knows they only married each other to keep up the image of a picture-perfect American family. On her worst days, she knows, he'd find some way to erase her from the picture too.

She takes the torn pieces of Barb's picture out of her bag, places them onto her bed. For a moment, her eyes linger on Barb, looking at the bandage on her hand.

She wipes the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand. What is she trying to find, here? Why did she even pick up this picture? Just because she missed her friend that much, or—

Oh.

There's something behind Barb.

There's something behind Barb.

She puts the torn piece down, starts arranging them into a whole picture once more. She digs through her drawers for tape to keep it from falling apart, and stares down at the picture of Barb.

“It could be light distortion,” she tells herself.

But the figure—she knows that figure. She’s seen the shape of it before, in the woods.

Something took Barb, that night. And she can’t ask Steve to come with her to check out her hunch, or Tommy and Carol, but—

But there was someone else there too, wasn’t there.

She has to go find Jonathan Byers.